

# **REJECTING**



# **THE REIFICATION**



# **OF REVOLT**





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# **Rejecting The Reification of Revolt**

**By Jason McGuinn**

## **Prologue to Post-Left Anarchy**

One of the most troubling problems of the contemporary anarchist milieu has been the frequent fixation on attempts to recreate the struggles of the past as though nothing significant has changed since 1919, 1936, or at best 1968. Partly this is a function of the long-prevalent anti-intellectualism amongst many anarchists. Partly it's a result of the historical eclipse of the anarchist movement following the victory of Bolshevik state communism and the (self)-defeat of the Spanish Revolution. And partly it is because the vast majority of the most important anarchist theorists — like Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta — come from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The void in the development of anarchist theory since the rebirth of the milieu in the 1960s has yet to be filled by any adequate new formulation of theory and practice powerful enough to end the impasse and catch the imaginations of the majority of contemporary anarchists in a similar manner to Bakunin's or Kropotkin's formulations in the nineteenth century.

Since the 1960s the originally minuscule — but since that time, ever-growing — anarchist milieu has been influenced (at least in passing) by the Civil Rights Movement, Paul Goodman, SDS, the Yippies, the anti-Vietnam War movement, Fred Woodworth, the Marxist New Left, the Situationist International, Sam Dolgoff and Murray Bookchin, the single-issue movements (anti-racist, feminist, anti-nuclear, anti-imperialist, environmental/ecological, animal rights, etc.), Noam Chomsky, Freddie Perlman, George Bradford/David Watson, Bob Black, Hakim Bey, Earth First! and Deep Ecology, neo-Paganism and New Ageism, the anti-globalization movement, and many others. Yet these various influences over the last forty years, both non-anarchist and anarchist alike, have failed to bring to the fore any inspiring new synthesis of critical and practical theory. A few anarchists, most notably Murray Bookchin and the Love & Rage project, have tried and failed miserably in attempting to meld the extremely diverse and idiosyncratic anarchist milieu into a genuinely new movement with a commonly-held theory. I would argue that in our current situation this is a project guaranteed to fail no matter who attempts it.

The alternative argued for by the post-left anarchist synthesis is still being created. It cannot be claimed by any single theorist or activist because it's a project that was in the air long before it started becoming a concrete set of proposals, texts and interventions. Those seeking to promote the synthesis have been primarily influenced by both the classical anarchist movement up

to the Spanish Revolution on the one hand, and several of the most promising critiques and modes of intervention developed since the 60s. The most important critiques involved include those of everyday life and the spectacle, of ideology and morality, of industrial technology, of work and of civilization. Modes of intervention focus on the concrete deployment of direct action in all facets of life. Rather than aiming at the construction of institutional or bureaucratic structures, these interventions aim at maximal critical effectiveness with minimal compromise in constantly changing networks of action.

Clearly these new critiques and modes of intervention are largely incompatible with both the old left of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and most of the New Left of the 60s and 70s. And just as clearly they are engaging a growing number of anarchists who gravitate to them because they seem to be much more congruent with the global situation we find ourselves in today than the old theories and tactics of leftism. If anarchism doesn't change to address the lived realities of the twenty-first century — by leaving the outmoded politics and organizational fetishism of leftism behind — its relevance will dissipate and the opportunities for radical contestation now so apparent will slowly vanish. Post-left anarchy is most simply a rubric through which many thoughtful contemporary anarchists would like to see the most vital of the new critiques and modes of intervention coalesce in an increasingly coherent and effective movement, which genuinely promotes unity in diversity, the complete autonomy of individuals and local groups in struggle, and the organic growth of levels of organization which don't hold back our collective energies, spontaneity and creativity.

## **Introduction**

Anarchist critiques of leftism have a history nearly as long as the term “left” has had a political meaning. The early anarchist movement emerged from many of the same struggles as other socialist movements (which made up a major part of the political left), from which it eventually differentiated itself. The anarchist movement and other socialist movements were primarily a product of the social ferment which gave rise to the Age of Revolutions — introduced by the English, American and French Revolutions. This was the historical period in which early capitalism was developing through the enclosure of commons to destroy community self-sufficiency, the industrialization of production with a factory system based on scientific techniques, and the aggressive expansion of the commodity market economy throughout the world. But the anarchist idea has always had deeper, more radical and more holistic implications than mere socialist criticism of the exploitation of labor under capitalism. This is because the anarchist idea springs from both the social ferment of the Age of Revolutions and the critical imagination of individuals seeking the abolition of every form of social alienation and domination.

The anarchist idea has an indelibly individualist foundation upon which its social critiques stand, always and everywhere proclaiming that only free individuals can create a free, unalienated society. Just as importantly, this individualist foundation has included the idea that the exploitation or oppression of any individual diminishes the freedom and integrity of all. This is quite unlike the collectivist ideologies of the political left, in which the individual is persistently devalued, denigrated or denied in both theory and practice — though not always in the ideological window dressing that is meant only to fool the naive. It is also what prevents genuine anarchists from taking the path of authoritarians of the left, right and center who casually employ mass exploitation, mass oppression and frequently mass imprisonment or murder to capture, protect and expand their holds on political and economic power.

Because anarchists understand that only people freely organizing themselves can create free communities, they refuse to sacrifice individuals or communities in pursuit of the kinds of power that would inevitably prevent the emergence of a free society. But given the almost mutual origins of the anarchist movement and the socialist left, as well as their historical battles to seduce or capture the support of the international workers movement by various means, it isn't surprising that over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries socialists have often adopted aspects of anarchist theory or practice as their own, while even more anarchists have adopted aspects of leftist theory and practice into various left-anarchist syntheses. This is despite the fact that in the worldwide struggles for individual and social freedom the political left has everywhere proven itself either a fraud or a failure in practice. Wherever the socialist left has been successful in organizing and taking power it has at best reformed (and rehabilitated) capitalism or at worst instituted new tyrannies, many with murderous policies — some of genocidal proportions.

Thus, with the stunning international disintegration of the political left following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the time is now past due for all anarchists to reevaluate every compromise that has been or continues to be made with the fading remnants of leftism. Whatever usefulness there might have been in the past for anarchists to make compromises with leftism is evaporating with the progressive disappearance of the left from even token opposition to the fundamental institutions of capitalism: wage labor, market production, and the rule of value.

## **Leftists in the Anarchist Milieu**

The rapid slide of the political left from the stage of history has increasingly left the international anarchist milieu as the only revolutionary anti-capitalist game in town. As the anarchist milieu has mushroomed in the last decade, most of its growth has come from disaffected youth attracted to its increasingly

visible, lively and iconoclastic activities and media. But a significant minority of that growth has also come from former leftists who have — sometimes slowly and sometimes suspiciously swiftly — decided that anarchists might have been right in their critiques of political authority and the state all along. Unfortunately, not all leftists just fade away — or change their spots — overnight. Most of the former leftists entering the anarchist milieu inevitably bring with them many of the conscious and unconscious leftist attitudes, prejudices, habits and assumptions that structured their old political milieus. Certainly, not all of these attitudes, habits and assumptions are necessarily authoritarian or anti-anarchist, but just as clearly many are.

Part of the problem is that many former leftists tend to misunderstand anarchism only as a form of anti-statist leftism, ignoring or downplaying its indelibly individualist foundation as irrelevant to social struggles. Many simply don't understand the huge divide between a self-organizing movement seeking to abolish every form of social alienation and a merely political movement seeking to reorganize production in a more egalitarian form. While others do understand the divide quite well, but seek to reform the anarchist milieu into a political movement anyway, for various reasons. Some former leftists do this because they consider the abolition of social alienation unlikely or impossible; some because they remain fundamentally opposed to any individualist (or sexual, or cultural, etc.) component of social theory and practice. Some cynically realize that they will never achieve any position of power in a genuinely anarchist movement and opt for building more narrowly political organizations with more room for manipulation. Still others, unused to autonomous thinking and practice, simply feel anxious and uncomfortable with many aspects of the anarchist tradition and wish to push those aspects of leftism within the anarchist milieu that help them feel less threatened and more secure — so that they can continue to play their former roles of cadre or militant, just without an explicitly authoritarian ideology to guide them.

In order to understand current controversies within the anarchist milieu, anarchists need to remain constantly aware — and carefully critical — of all this. Ad hominem attacks within the anarchist milieu are nothing new, and most often a waste of time, because they substitute for rational criticism of people's actual positions. (Too often rational criticism of positions is simply ignored by those unable to argue for their own positions, whose only recourse is to wild or irrelevant accusations or attempted smears.) But there remains an important place for ad hominem criticism addressed to people's chosen identities, especially when these identities are so strong that they include sedimented, often unconscious, layers of habits, prejudices and dependencies. These habits, prejudices and dependencies — leftist or otherwise — all constitute highly appropriate targets for anarchist criticism.

## **Recuperation and the Left-Wing of Capital**

Historically, the vast majority of leftist theory and practice has functioned as a loyal opposition to capitalism. Leftists have been (often vociferously) critical of particular aspects of capitalism, but always ready to reconcile themselves with the broader international capitalist system whenever they've been able to extract a bit of power, partial reforms — or sometimes, just the vague promise of partial reforms. For this reason leftists have often been quite justifiably criticized (by both ultra-leftists and by anarchists) as the left wing of capital.

It's not just a problem that those leftists who claim to be anti-capitalist don't really mean it, although some have consciously used such lies to gain positions of power for themselves in opposition movements. The major problem is that leftists have incomplete, self-contradictory theories about capitalism and social change. As a result their practice always tends towards the recuperation (or co-optation and reintegration) of social rebellion. Always with a focus on organization, leftists use a variety of tactics in their attempts to reify and mediate social struggles — representation and substitution, imposition of collectivist ideologies, collectivist moralism, and ultimately repressive violence in one form or another. Typically, leftists have employed all of these tactics in the most unrepentently heavy-handed and explicitly authoritarian of ways. But these tactics (except for the last) can also be — and have often been — employed in more subtle, less-overtly authoritarian ways as well, the most important examples for our purposes being the historical and present practices of many (but not all) left anarchists.

Reification is often most generally described as “thingification.” It’s the reduction of a complex, living process to a frozen, dead or mechanical collection of objects or actions. Political mediation (a form of practical reification) is the attempt to intervene in conflicts as a third-party arbiter or representative. Ultimately these are the definitive characteristics of all leftist theory and practice. Leftism always involves the reification and mediation of social revolt, while consistent anarchists reject this reification of revolt. The formulation of post-left anarchy is an attempt to help make this rejection of the reification of revolt more consistent, widespread and self-aware than it already is.

## **Anarchy as a Theory & Critique of Organization**

One of the most fundamental principles of anarchism is that social organization must serve free individuals and free groups, not vice versa. Anarchy cannot exist when individuals or social groups are dominated — whether that domination is facilitated and enforced by outside forces or by their own organization.

For anarchists the central strategy of would-be revolutionaries has been the non-mediating (anti-authoritarian, often informal or minimalist) self-organization of radicals (based on affinity and/or specific theoretical/practical activities) in order to encourage and participate in the self-organization of popular rebellion and insurrection against capital and state in all their forms. Even among most left anarchists there has always been at least some level of understanding that mediating organizations are at best highly unstable and unavoidably open to recuperation, requiring constant vigilance and struggle to avoid their complete recuperation.

But for all leftists (including left anarchists), on the other hand, the central strategy is always expressly focused on creating mediating organizations between capital & state on the one side and the mass of disaffected, relatively powerless people on the other. Usually these organizations have been focused on mediating between capitalists and workers or between the state and the working class. But many other mediations involving opposition to particular institutions or involving interventions among particular groups (social minorities, subgroups of the working class, etc.) have been common.

These mediating organizations have included political parties, syndicalist unions, mass political organizations, front groups, single-issue campaign groups, etc. Their goals are always to crystallize and congeal certain aspects of the more general social revolt into set forms of ideology and congruent forms of activity. The construction of formal, mediating organizations always and necessarily involves at least some levels of:

- **Reductionism** (Only particular aspects of the social struggle are included in these organizations. Other aspects are ignored, invalidated or repressed, leading to further and further compartmentalization of the struggle. Which in turn facilitates manipulation by elites and their eventual transformation into purely reformist lobbying societies with all generalized, radical critique emptied out.)
- **Specialization or Professionalism** (Those most involved in the day-to-day operation of the organization are selected — or self-selected — to perform increasingly specialized roles within the organization, often leading to an official division between leaders and led, with gradations of power and influence introduced in the form of intermediary roles in the evolving organizational hierarchy.)
- **Substitutionism** (The formal organization increasingly becomes the focus of strategy and tactics rather than the people-in-revolt. In theory and practice, the organization tends to be progressively substituted for the people, the organization's leadership — especially if it has become formal — tends to substitute itself for the organization as a whole, and

eventually a maximal leader often emerges who ends up embodying and controlling the organization.)

- **Ideology** (The organization becomes the primary subject of theory with individuals assigned roles to play, rather than people constructing their own self-theories. All but the most self-consciously anarchistic formal organizations tend to adapt some form of collectivist ideology, in which the social group at some level is acceded to have more political reality than the free individual. Wherever sovereignty lies, there lies political authority; if sovereignty is not dissolved into each and every person it always requires the subjugation of individuals to a group in some form.)

All anarchist theories of self-organization, on the contrary, call for (in various ways and with different emphases):

- **Individual and Group Autonomy with Free Initiative** (The autonomous individual is the fundamental basis of all genuinely anarchistic theories of organization, for without the autonomous individual, any other level of autonomy is impossible. Freedom of initiative is likewise fundamental for both individuals and groups. With no higher powers comes the ability and necessity for all decisions to be made at their point of immediate impact. As a side note, post-structuralists or postmodernists who deny the existence of the autonomous anarchist individual most often mistake the valid critique of the metaphysical subject to imply that even the process of lived subjectivity is a complete fiction — a self-deluded perspective which would make social theory impossible and unnecessary.)
- **Free Association** (Association is never free if it is forced. This means that people are free to associate with anyone in any combination they wish, and to dissociate or refuse association as well.)
- **Refusal of Political Authority, and thus of Ideology** (The word “anarchy” literally means no rule or no ruler. No rule and no ruler both mean there is no political authority above people themselves, who can and should make all of their own decisions however they see fit. Most forms of ideology function to legitimate the authority of one or another elite or institution to make decisions for people, or else they serve to delegitimize people’s own decision-making for themselves.)
- **Small, Simple, Informal, Transparent and Temporary Organization** (Most anarchists agree that small face-to-face groups allow the most complete participation with the least amount of unnecessary specialization. The most simply structured and least complex organizations

leave the least opportunity for the development of hierarchy and bureaucracy. Informal organization is the most protean and most able to continually adapt itself to new conditions. Open and transparent organization is the most easily understood and controlled by its members. The longer organizations exist the more susceptible they usually become to the development of rigidity, specialization and eventually hierarchy. Organizations have life spans, and it is rare that any anarchist organization will be important enough that it should exist over generations.)

- **Decentralized, Federal Organization with Direct Decision-Making and Respect for Minorities** (When they are necessary larger, more complex and formal organizations can only remain self-manageable by their participants if they are decentralized and federal. When face-to-face groups — with the possibility for full participation and convivial discussion and decision-making — become impossible due to size, the best course is to decentralize the organization with many smaller groups in a federal structure. Or when smaller groups need to organize with peer groups to better address larger-scale problems, free federation is preferred — with absolute self-determination at every level beginning with the base. As long as groups remain of manageable size, assemblies of all concerned must be able to directly make decisions according to whatever methods they find agreeable. However, minorities can never be forced into agreement with majorities on the basis of any fictitious conception of group sovereignty. Anarchy is not direct democracy, though anarchists may certainly choose to use democratic methods of decision-making when and where they wish. The only real respect for minority opinions involves accepting that minorities have the same powers as majorities, requiring negotiation and the greatest level of mutual agreement for stable, effective group decision-making)

In the end, the biggest difference is that anarchists advocate self-organization while leftists want to organize you. For leftists, the emphasis is always on recruiting to their organizations, so that you can adopt the role of a cadre serving their goals. They don't want to see you adopt your own self-determined theory and activities because then you wouldn't be allowing them to manipulate you. Anarchists want you to determine your own theory and activity and self-organize your activity with like-minded others. Leftists want to create ideological, strategic and tactical unity through “self-discipline” (your self-repression) when possible, or organizational discipline (threat of sanctions) when necessary. Either way, you are expected to give up your autonomy to follow their heteronomous path that has already been marked out for you.

## Anarchy as a Theory & Critique of Ideology

The anarchist critique of ideology dates from the work of Max Stirner, though he did not use the term himself to describe his critique. Ideology is the means by which alienation, domination and exploitation are all rationalized and justified through the deformation of human thought and communication. All ideology in essence involves the substitution of alien (or incomplete) concepts or images for human subjectivity. Ideologies are systems of false consciousness in which people no longer see themselves directly as subjects in their relation to their world. Instead they conceive of themselves in some manner as subordinate to one type or another of abstract entity or entities which are mistaken as the real subjects or actors in their world.

Whenever any system of ideas and duties is structured with an abstraction at its center — assigning people roles or duties for its own sake — such a system is always an ideology. All the various forms of ideology are structured around different abstractions, yet they all always serve the interests of hierarchical and alienating social structures, since they are hierarchy and alienation in the realm of thought and communication. Even if an ideology rhetorically opposes hierarchy or alienation in its content, its form still remains consistent with what is ostensibly being opposed, and this form will always tend to undermine the apparent content of the ideology. Whether the abstraction is God, the State, the Party, the Organization, Technology, the Family, Humanity, Peace, Ecology, Nature, Work, Love, or even Freedom; if it is conceived and presented as if it is an active subject with a being of its own which makes demands of us, then it is the center of an ideology. Capitalism, Individualism, Communism, Socialism, and Pacifism are each ideological in important respects as they are usually conceived. Religion and Morality are always ideological by their very definitions. Even resistance, revolution and anarchy often take on ideological dimensions when we are not careful to maintain a critical awareness of how we are thinking and what the actual purposes of our thoughts are. Ideology is nearly ubiquitous. From advertisements and commercials, to academic treatises and scientific studies, almost every aspect of contemporary thinking and communication is ideological, and its real meaning for human subjects is lost under layers of mystification and confusion.

Leftism, as the reification and mediation of social rebellion, is always ideological because it always demands that people conceive of themselves first of all in terms of their roles within and relationships to leftist organizations and oppressed groups, which are in turn considered more real than the individuals who combine to create them. For leftists history is never made by individuals, but rather by organizations, social groups, and — above all, for Marxists — social classes. Each major leftist organization usually molds its own ideological legitimization whose major points all members are expected

to learn and defend, if not proselytize. To seriously criticize or question this ideology is always to risk expulsion from the organization.

Post-left anarchists reject all ideologies in favor of the individual and communal construction of self-theory. Individual self-theory is theory in which the integral individual-in-context (in all her or his relationships, with all her or his history, desires, and projects, etc.) is always the subjective center of perception, understanding and action. Communal self-theory is similarly based on the group as subject, but always with an underlying awareness of the individuals (and their own self-theories) which make up the group or organization. Non-ideological, anarchist organizations (or informal groups) are always explicitly based upon the autonomy of the individuals who construct them, quite unlike leftist organizations which require the surrender of personal autonomy as a prerequisite for membership.

### **Neither God, nor Master, nor Moral Order: Anarchy as Critique of Morality and Moralism**

The anarchist critique of morality also dates from Stirner's master work, *The Ego and Its Own* (1844). Morality is a system of reified values — abstract values which are taken out of any context, set in stone, and converted into unquestionable beliefs to be applied regardless of a person's actual desires, thoughts or goals, and regardless of the situation in which a person finds him- or herself. Moralism is the practice of not only reducing living values to reified morals, but of considering oneself better than others because one has subjected oneself to morality (self-righteousness), and of proselytizing for the adoption of morality as a tool of social change.

Often, when people's eyes are opened by scandals or disillusionment and they start to dig down under the surface of the ideologies and received ideas they have taken for granted all their lives, the apparent coherence and power of the new answer they find (whether in religion, leftism or even anarchism) can lead them to believe that they have now found the Truth (with a capital 'T'). Once this begins to happen people too often turn onto the road of moralism, with its attendant problems of elitism and ideology. Once people succumb to the illusion that they have found the one Truth that would fix everything — if only enough other people also understood, the temptation is then to view this one Truth as the solution to the implied Problem around which everything must be theorized, which leads them to build an absolute value system in defense of their magic Solution to the Problem this Truth points them to. At this point moralism takes over the place of critical thinking.

The various forms of leftism encourage different types of morality and moralism, but most generally within leftism the Problem is that people are

exploited by capitalists (or dominated by them, or alienated from society or from the productive process. etc.). The Truth is that the People need to take control of the Economy (and/or Society) into their own hands. The biggest Obstacle to this is the Ownership and Control of the Means of Production by the Capitalist Class backed up by its monopoly over the use of legalized violence through its control of the political State. To overcome this people must be approached with evangelical fervor to convince them to reject all aspects, ideas and values of Capitalism and adopt the culture, ideas and values of an idealized notion of the Working Class in order to take over the Means of Production by breaking the power of the Capitalist Class and constituting the power of the Working Class (or its representative institutions, if not their Central Committees or its Supreme Leader) over all of Society. This often leads to some form of Workerism (usually including the adoption of the dominant image of the culture of the working class, in other words, working-class lifestyles), a belief in (usually Scientific) Organizational Salvation, belief in the Science of (the inevitable victory of the Proletariat in) Class Struggle, etc. And therefore tactics consistent with building the fetishized One True Organization of the Working Class to contest for Economic and Political Power. An entire value system is built around a particular, highly oversimplified conception of the world, and moral categories of good and evil are substituted for critical evaluation in terms of individual and communal subjectivity.

The descent into moralism is never an automatic process. It is a tendency which naturally manifests itself whenever people start down the path of reified social critique. Morality always involves derailing the development of a consistent critical theory of self and society. It short-circuits the development of strategy and tactics appropriate for this critical theory, and encourages an emphasis on personal and collective salvation through living up to the ideals of this morality, by idealizing a culture or lifestyle as virtuous and sublime, while demonizing everything else as being either the temptations or perversions of evil. One inevitable emphasis then becomes the petty, continuous attempt to enforce the boundaries of virtue and evil by policing the lives of anyone who claims to be a member of the in-group sect, while self-righteously denouncing out-groups. In the workerist milieu, for example, this means attacking anyone who doesn't sing paeans to the virtues of working class organization (and especially to the virtues of the One True form of Organization), or to the virtues of the dominant image of Working Class culture or lifestyles (whether it be beer drinking instead of drinking wine, rejecting hip subcultures, or driving a Ford or Chevy instead of BMWs or Volvos). The goal, of course, is to maintain the lines of inclusion and exclusion between the in-group and the out-group (the out-group being variously portrayed in highly industrialized countries as the Middle and Upper Classes, or the Petty Bourgeois and Bourgeois, or the Managers and Capitalists big and small).

Living up to morality means sacrificing certain desires and temptations (regardless of the actual situation you might find yourself in) in favor of the rewards of virtue. Don't ever eat meat. Don't ever drive SUVs. Don't ever work 9–5. Don't ever scab. Don't ever vote. Don't ever talk to a cop. Don't ever take money from the government. Don't ever pay taxes. Don't ever etc., etc. Not a very attractive way to go about living your life for anyone interested in critically thinking about the world and evaluating what to do for oneself.

Rejecting Morality involves constructing a critical theory of one's self and society (always self-critical, provisional and never totalistic) in which a clear goal of ending one's social alienation is never confused with reified partial goals. It involves emphasizing what people have to gain from radical critique and solidarity rather than what people must sacrifice or give up in order to live virtuous lives of politically correct morality.

### **Post-Left Anarchy: Neither Left, nor Right, but Autonomous**

Post-left anarchy is not something new and different. It's neither a political program nor an ideology. It's not meant in any way to constitute some sort of faction or sect within the more general anarchist milieu. It's in no way an opening to the political right; the right and left have always had much more in common with each other than either has in common with anarchism. And it's certainly not intended as a new commodity in the already crowded marketplace of pseudo-radical ideas. It is simply intended as a restatement of the most fundamental and important anarchist positions within the context of a disintegrating international political left.

If we want to avoid being taken down with the wreckage of leftism as it crumbles, we need to fully, consciously and explicitly dissociate ourselves from its manifold failures — and especially from the invalid presuppositions of leftism which led to these failures. This doesn't mean that it's impossible for anarchists to also consider themselves leftists — there has been a long, most often honorable, history of anarchist and left syntheses. But it does mean that in our contemporary situation it is not possible for anyone — even left-anarchists — to avoid confronting the fact that the failures of leftism in practice require a complete critique of leftism and an explicit break with every aspect of leftism implicated in its failures.

Left anarchists can no longer avoid subjecting their own leftism to intensive critique. From this point on it is simply not sufficient (not that it really ever has been) to project all the failures of leftism onto the most explicitly obnoxious varieties and episodes of leftist practice, like Leninism, Trotskyism and Stalinism. The critiques of leftist statism and leftist party organization have always been only the tip of a critique that must now explicitly encompass

the entire iceberg of leftism, including those aspects often long incorporated into the traditions of anarchist practice. Any refusal to broaden and deepen the criticism of leftism constitutes a refusal to engage in the self-examination necessary for genuine self-understanding. And stubborn avoidance of self-understanding can never be justified for anyone seeking radical social change.

We now have the unprecedented historical opportunity, along with a plenitude of critical means, to recreate an international anarchist movement that can stand on its own and bow to no other movements. All that remains is for all of us to take this opportunity to critically reformulate our anarchist theories and reinvent our anarchist practices in light of our most fundamental desires and goals.

**Reject the reification of revolt. Leftism is dead! Long live anarchy!**

# **Leftism 101**

## **By Lawrence Jarach**

### **What is Leftism?**

For most it means some form of socialism, despite the fact that there are plenty of leftists who are not opposed to capitalism (clearly from the actual history of socialism, not all socialists are opposed to capitalism either). Plenty of other arguments can be made about that, but let's just keep things simple and assume that the two terms are synonymous. As is the case with most vague terms, however, it's easier to come up with a list of characteristics than a definition. Leftism encompasses many divergent ideas, strategies, and tactics; are there any common threads that unite all leftists, despite some obvious differences? In order to begin an attempt at an answer, it is necessary to examine the philosophical antecedents to what can broadly be termed Socialism.

Liberalism, Humanism, and Republicanism are political and philosophical schools of thought deriving from the modern European tradition (roughly beginning during the Renaissance). Without going into details, adherents of the three (especially Liberalism) presume the existence of an ideal property-owning male individual who is a fully rational (or at least a potentially rational) agent. This idealized individual stands opposed to the arbitrary authority of the economic and political systems of monarchism and feudalism, as well as the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church. All three (LH&R) presume the capacity of anyone (male), through education and hard work, to succeed in a free market (of commodities and ideas). Competition is the overall ethos of all three.

The promoters of LH&R insist that these modernist philosophies—compared to monarchism, elitism, and feudalism—are advances on the road to human freedom. They believe it more beneficial for what they call The Greater Good to adhere to and promote a philosophy that at least proposes the ability of anyone to gain some kind of control over her/his own life, whether in the realm of education, economic prosperity, or political interactions. The ultimate goals of LH&R are to do away with economic scarcity and intellectual/spiritual poverty, while promoting the idea of more democratic governance. They promote this under the rubric of Justice, and they see the State as its ultimate guarantor.

Socialism as a modern movement has been greatly influenced by these three philosophies. Like those who adhere to LH&R, leftists are concerned with, and are opposed to, economic and social injustice. They all propose ameliorating social ills through active intervention or charity, whether under the auspices of the State, NGOs, or other formal organizations. Very few of the

proposed solutions or stopgaps promote (or even acknowledge) self-organized solutions engaged in by those directly suffering such ills. Welfare, affirmative action programs, psychiatric hospitals, drug rehabilitation facilities, etc. are all examples of various attempts to deal with social problems. Given the premises of these overlapping philosophies and their practical frameworks, they have the appearance of being the results of intelligence and knowledge mixed with empathy and the desire to help people. Cooperation for The Common Good is seen as more beneficial to humanity than individual competition. However, socialism also takes the existence of competition for granted. Liberals and socialists alike believe that human beings do not naturally get along, so we must be educated and encouraged to be cooperative. When all else fails, this can always be enforced by the State.

## **Moderate, Radical, and Extreme Leftism**

### **Tactics and strategies**

Regardless of the fact that there is plenty of overlap and blending—precluding real, discrete boundaries—I hope that describing these various manifestations of leftism will be a way to identify certain particular characteristics.

In terms of strategy and tactics, moderate leftists believe that things can be made better by working within current structures and institutions. Clearly reformist, moderate leftists promote legal, peaceful, and polite superficial alterations in the status quo, eventually hoping to legislate socialism into existence. The democracy they champion is bourgeois: one person, one vote, majority rule.

Radical leftists promotes a mixture of legal and illegal tactics, depending on whatever appears to have a better chance of succeeding at the moment, but they ultimately want the sanction of some properly constituted legal institutions (especially when they get to make most of the rules to be enforced). They are pragmatic, hoping for peaceful change, but ready to fight if they believe it to be necessary. The democracy they promote is more proletarian: they aren't worried about the process of any particular election, so long as gains are made at the expense of the bosses and mainstream politicians.

Extreme leftists are amoral pragmatists, a strategic orientation that can also be termed opportunistic. They are decidedly impolite, explicitly desiring the destruction of current institutions (often including the State), with the desire to remake them so that only they themselves will be able to make and enforce new laws. They are much more willing to use force in the service of their goals. The democracy they promote is usually based on a Party.

## **Relationship to capitalists**

All leftists privilege the category of worker as worker/producer, an entity that exists only within the sphere of the economy. Moderate leftists campaign for workers' rights (to strike, to have job security and safety, to have decent and fair contracts), trying to mitigate the more obvious abuses of the bosses through the passage and enforcement of progressive legislation. They want capitalism to be organized with "People Before Profits" (as the overused slogan has it), ignoring the internal logic and history of capitalism. Moderate leftists promote socially responsible investing and want a more just distribution of wealth; social wealth in the form of the much-touted "safety net," and personal wealth in the form of higher wages and increased taxes on corporations and the rich. They want to balance the rights of property and labor.

Radical leftists favor workers at the expense of the bosses. Workers are always right to the radical leftist. They wish to change the legal structure in such a way to reflect this favoritism, which is supposed to compensate for the previous history of exploitation. The redistribution of wealth envisioned by radical leftists builds on the higher wages and increased taxation of the corporations and the rich to include selective expropriation/nationalization (with or without compensation) of various resources (banks, natural resources for example).

Extreme leftists promote the total expropriation — without compensation — of the capitalist class, not only to right the wrongs of economic exploitation, but to remove the capitalist class from political power as well. At some point, the workers are to be at least nominally in charge of economic and political decision making (although that is usually mediated through a Party leadership).

## **The role of the State**

Leftists view the State on a continuum of ambivalence. Most are clear that the role of the State is to further the goals of whatever class happens to rule at any given period; further they all recognize that the ruling class always reserves for itself a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and violence to enforce their rule. In the political imaginations of all moderate and some radical leftists, the State (even with a completely capitalist ruling class) can be used to remedy many social problems, from the excesses of transnational corporations to the abuses of those who have been traditionally disenfranchised (immigrants, women, minorities, the homeless, etc.). For extreme leftists, only their own State can solve such problems, because it is in the interest of the current ruling class to maintain divisions among those who are not of the ruling class. Despite the ambivalence, an attachment to the functions of government as executed by the State remains. This is the pivotal area of conflict between

all leftists and all anarchists, despite the historical positioning of anarchism within the spectrum of leftism — about which more below.

## The role of the individual

Missing from all these different strains of leftism is a discussion of the individual. While LH&R refer briefly to the individual, these philosophies do not take into account non-property-owning males, females, or juveniles — who are indeed considered the property of the normative individual: the adult property-owning man. This led to the complete lack of interest in (and the accompanying exploitation of) peasants and workers, a disregard that is supposed to be corrected by socialism. Unfortunately, virtually all socialists only posit the category Worker and Peasant as collective classes — a mass to be molded and directed — never considering the desires or interests of the individual (male or female) worker or peasant to control their own lives. According to the ideological imperatives of leftist thought, the self-activity of these masses is seen suspiciously through the ideological blinkers of the competitive ethos of capitalism (since the masses aren't yet intelligent enough to be socialists); the workers will perhaps be able to organize themselves into defensive trade unions in order to safeguard their wages, while the peasants will only want to own and work their own piece of land. Again, education and enforcement of cooperation is necessary for these masses to become conscious political radicals.

## A Generic Leftism?

So all leftists share the goals of making up for injustice by decree, whether the decree comes out of better/more responsive representatives and leaders, a more democratic political process, or the elimination of a non-worker power base. They all desire to organize, mobilize, and direct masses of people, with the eventual goal of attaining a more or less coherent majority, in order to propel progressive and democratic change of social institutions. Recruitment, education, and inculcating leftist values are some of the more mundane strategies leftists use to increase their influence in the wider political landscape.

All leftists have a common distrust of regular (non-political/non-politicized) people being able to decide for themselves how to solve the problems that face them. All leftists share an abiding faith in leadership. Not just a trust of particular leaders who portray themselves as having certain moral or ethical virtues over and above common people, but of the very principle of leadership. This confidence in leadership never brings representational politics into question. The existence of elected or appointed leaders who speak and act on behalf, or in the place, of individuals and groups is a given; mediation in

the realm of politics is taken as a necessity, removing most decision making from individuals and groups. Leftists share this commitment to leadership and representation — they believe themselves able to justly represent those who have traditionally been excluded from politics: the disenfranchised, the voiceless, the weak.

The leftist activist, as a representative of those who suffer, is a person who believes her/himself to be indispensable to improving the lives of others. This derives from a dual-pronged notion common to all leftists:

1. Non-political people, left to their own devices, will never be able to alter their situations in a radical or revolutionary manner (Lenin's dismissal of workers as never being able to move beyond a "trade union mentality" without some professional outside help comes to mind here); and
2. Those with more intelligence or a better analysis are both wise and ethical enough to lead (whether through example or by decree) and organize others for their own good, and perhaps more importantly, the greater good.

The unspoken but implicit theme that runs through this brief assessment of leftism is a reliance on authoritarian relations, whether assumed or enforced, brutally compelling or gently rational. The existence of an economy (exchange of commodities in a market) presumes the existence of one or more institutions to mediate disputes between those who produce, those who own, and those who consume; the existence of a representational political process presumes the existence of one or more institutions to mediate disputes between diverse parties based on common interest (often with conflicting goals); the existence of leadership presumes that there are substantive differences in the emotional and intellectual capacities of those who direct and those who follow. There are plenty of rationalizations contributing to the maintenance of such institutions of social control (schools, prisons, the military, the workplace), from efficiency to expediency, but they all ultimately rely on the legitimate (sanctioned by the State) use of coercive authority to enforce decisions. Leftists share a faith in the mediating influence of wise and ethical leaders who can work within politically neutral, socially progressive, and humane institutional frameworks. Their thoroughly hierarchical and authoritarian natures, however, should be clear even after a cursory glance.

## **Are All Forms of Anarchism Leftism?**

All anarchists share a desire to abolish government; that is the definition of anarchism. Starting with Bakunin, anarchism has been explicitly anti-statist, anti-capitalist, and anti-authoritarian; no serious anarchist seeks to alter that. Leftists have consistently supported and promoted the functions of the State, have an ambiguous relationship to capitalist development, and

are all interested in maintaining hierarchical relationships. In addition, historically they have either tacitly ignored or actively suppressed the desires of individuals and groups for autonomy and self-organization, further eroding any credible solidarity between themselves and anarchists. On a purely definitional level, then, there should be an automatic distinction between leftists and anarchists, regardless of how things have appeared in history.

Despite these differences, many anarchists have thought of themselves as extreme leftists — and continue to do so — because they share many of the same analyses and interests (a distaste for capitalism, the necessity of revolution, for example) as leftists; many revolutionary leftists have also considered anarchists to be their (naive) comrades — except in moments when the leftists gain some power; then the anarchists are either co-opted, jailed, or executed. The possibility for an extreme leftist to be anti-statist may be high, but is certainly not guaranteed, as any analysis of history will show.

Left anarchists retain some kind of allegiance to 19th century LH&R and socialist philosophers, preferring the broad, generalized (and therefore extremely vague) category of socialism/anti-capitalism and the strategy of mass political struggles based on coalitions with other leftists, all the while showing little (if any) interest in promoting individual and group autonomy. From these premises, they can quite easily fall prey to the centralizing tendencies and leadership functions that dominate the tactics of leftists. They are quick to quote Bakunin (maybe Kropotkin too) and advocate organizational forms that might have been appropriate in the era of the First International, apparently oblivious to the sweeping changes that have occurred in the world in the past hundred-plus years — and they then have the gall to ridicule Marxists for remaining wedded to Marx's outdated theories, as if by not naming their own tendencies after other dead guys they are thereby immune from similar mistakes.

The drawbacks and problems with Marxism, however — for example that it promotes the idea of a linear progression of history of order developing out of chaos, freedom developing out of oppression, material abundance developing out of scarcity, socialism developing out of capitalism, plus an absolute faith in Science as the ideologically neutral pursuit of pure Knowledge, and a similar faith in the liberatory function of all technology — are the same drawbacks and problems with the anarchism of Bakunin and Kropotkin. All of this seems lost on left anarchists. They blithely continue to promote a century-old version of anarchism, clearly unaware of, or unconcerned by, the fact that the philosophical and practical failures of leftism — in terms of the individual, the natural world, and appropriate modes of resistance to the continued domination of a flexible, adaptable, and expanding capitalism — are shared by this archaic form of anarchism as well.

Those of us who are interested in promoting radical social change in general, and anarchy in particular, need to emulate and improve upon successful (however temporary) revolutionary projects for liberation, rather than congratulating ourselves for being the heirs of Bakunin (et al.). We can do this best if we free ourselves from the historical baggage and the ideological and strategic constraints of all varieties of leftism.





Anti-Leftist Reading List:

- \*The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression
- \*The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties by Robert Conquest
- \*The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine  
by Robert Conquest
- \*Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare by Phillip Short
- \*Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot by David P. Chandler
- \*Mao's War Against Nature by Judith Shapiro
- \*The Poverty of Historicism by Karl Popper
- \*Workers Against Work by Michael Seidman
- \*The Mirror of Production by Jean Baudrillard
- \* To The Customers: Insurrection and Doublethink  
(published by Pistols Drawn)
- \*Anarchy and Leftism: A Marriage Made in Mental Illness  
(Enemy Combatant Publications)

Because Leftism is the active perception of social struggle as a political program, it is ideological from top to bottom. The struggle of the Left does not grow out of the desires, needs and dreams of the living individuals exploited, oppressed, dominated and dispossessed by this society. It is **not** the activity of people striving to re-appropriate their own lives and seeking the tools necessary for doing so. Rather it is an authoritarian program formulated in the minds of leftist leaders or in organizational prescriptions that exists **above** and **before** people's individual struggles and to which these latter are to subordinate themselves.

The two essays gathered here argue for the necessity of freeing the practice of anarchy from the confines of politics by shedding the last vestiges of leftism and going on our merry way toward the unmapped creation of full and self-determined lives. As with most of our offerings, this pamphlet is a testing ground for what is *conditioned* (identity politics, useless/fruitless “activism” and other red herrings) and what is authentically *desired*.

## ENEMY COMBATANT PUBLICATIONS



PETREL, NORTH DAKOTA

